

BONUS CHAPTERS



HOW TO BE A
CHRISTIAN
WITHOUT
GOING TO
CHURCH 

THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO
ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

KELLY BEAN

HOW TO BE A CHRISTIAN WITHOUT GOING TO CHURCH

THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE
FORMS OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

KELLY BEAN



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

REAL DREAMS AND REAL LIFE IN NEO-MONASTIC COMMUNITY

It All Comes Down to Broccoli

The Power of Perspective

In the fall of 2010, I received an invitation from Ryan Bolger of Fuller Theological Seminary to contribute to a festschrift for retiring professor Eddie Gibbs (festschrift: “a book honoring a respected person, especially an academic, and presented during his or her lifetime”¹). To be honest, before I got Ryan’s email, I didn’t know what a festschrift was, but I did know who Dr. Gibbs was. He is well known for founding the Institute for the Study of Emerging Churches at the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts, and is now Professor Emeritus of Church Growth and School of Intercultural Studies. His 2005 book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, made a significant contribution to the new thought and understanding of what it means to engage in ministry in these rapidly changing times and has been a help to many of us.

The invitation was both an honor and a challenge. As more of a practitioner than an academic, I puzzled over what would be best for my contribution. Having led in a variety of ways and settings and tended a small organic community for years, I did have stories to tell. However, I wondered what would help people most.

At that time, I was co-leading a very newly forming intentional community, Urban Abbey, in Kenton, a neighborhood of North Portland. Several households who had committed to the community had not yet been able to relocate into the neighborhood, but five households were already settled in. Ken and I were stuck in the suburbs, but we anticipated moving to Kenton soon. We enrolled our youngest child Elliot in a unique multi-cultural high school that was part of the Christo-Rey Network, a Lasallian mission to the diverse, low income North Portland area. We made the commitment to a (45 minute each way) commute until we could move into the neighborhood with the rest of the Abbeyites. In this way, Elliot could begin high school as a freshman in the neighborhood in the fall of 2010 and get situated until we could move.

1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festschrift>

Although we, who comprised Urban Abbey, had floods of thoughts, prayer, hopes, and dreams under our belts and in our hearts, the community was just beginning to take shape. In consideration of these hopes and dreams, I decided that, for my festschrift contribution, I would write an imaginative piece to describe our history and ideals up to that point and attempt to depict what we hoped to become in the future, but had not quite become yet. The festschrift was published in the fall of 2012, as “The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions.”

Have you had the experience of going back three years in your personal journals and reading with the perspective of time? It can be interesting and insightful to say the least. I invite you to enter my imaginative festschrift story, written in 2010. Then read on as I’ve added Part Two, written in 2013. I offer you the benefit of seeing through the eyes of time and real life experience. This first piece is based on a whole lot of hopes and enthusiasm held in 2010, depicting the community of which we were dreaming. The second piece stands in the stark light of real life and humbling experience. Without further ado, here’s the 2010 festschrift submission.

The Journey to New Church

The Fuller Festschrift chapter: “The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions: The Power of Small, Sustainable, Nimble Micro-Communities of Jesus.”

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago (the 1970’s) in the small suburban burg of West Linn, Oregon, there was a dreamer. This dreamer imagined communities and housing where the old and the young, the brown and the white, the lonely and the overworked found a home together. While some spent time going to homecoming dances, painting their nails and sharing schoolgirl gossip, she sketched out designs for residential complexes where people would share gardens, kitchens, pets, and day-to-day life.

But she grew up and bought into a new dream: The American Dream. She married and had children, she – with her husband – started a good business, joined a church, built a big house in the suburbs, worked hard to get more stuff and better stuff and to make sure that her children had every opportunity to learn.

Even though she loved Jesus, served lunches to street people and had 34 different people live with her family at one time or another, the dream began to feel hollow. She tried moving to the country. She built a bigger house and filled it with friends and family. But that bigger house was expensive, and instead of living a relaxing country life she and her husband found they were working harder than ever. They both knew they were going the wrong way and so they made the tough decision to let go of the beautiful home with the

trout-filled creek, room to roam and a stand of old growth trees. They moved back to the suburbs into a much smaller house on a postage-stamp-sized piece of land to reassess life.

Over the course of these two decades of pursuing the American Dream, the dreamer had also been leading and pastoring a small Christian community in her living room. By the time she sold her country home, the larger church that this small house gathering was part of closed its doors, but the little community, Third Saturday, continued on. It was in that incubator of growing community that her long-lost dreams began to resurface.

She began to think thoughts like... How do large church buildings help the neighborhood they are in? Who is served by our gathering? Why is it that when I want to gather with my Third Saturday community friends we must schedule far in advance and people must get into cars and drive far from their homes to get together? Why is it that I am too busy to sit and have tea with a good friend on short notice? Why am I so tired? Why is it so hard to befriend the poor and "the other"? How can we make do with less, drive less and give more? And as she thought, some in that little community began to wonder with her as well.

One fine day in the year 2006, the dreamer had a cup of coffee with a good friend and mentor. The mentor had been asking himself some questions too: "In what ways have I become culturally captive to a Western, middle class, consumer understanding of Christianity? How can I begin to break free from this to begin to live out the holistic gospel?" They both agreed that such a re-orientation must be done with the support of a community of Christ-followers who were also willing to take such a journey. What if they were to uproot from the comfort and isolation of their suburban neighborhoods and gather others to form a transformative community?

But what would it take to leave the suburbs and become rooted in a more economically and ethnically diverse urban neighborhood where households could be in close proximity? Would doing so help challenge them to look beyond their white middle class view of the world? Would they learn from the neighborhood, and could they then give something back to the neighborhood? Could they model a healthy egalitarian community where women and men lived and worked together as equals? Could they open themselves to being transformed and in the process make a difference in the world?

The important first step was to share this spark of an idea with their spouses. The wife of the mentor was hesitant. Letting go of what she knew sounded very scary. But she also knew that she was discontented with her isolated suburban life. Her children had grown and moved out and she wanted something more. The husband of the dreamer was not at all excited. He had grown up the son of a poor single mom in the very neighborhoods that were up for consideration. He had worked his entire life to get away from those neighborhoods, and now that he had gotten away, to consider going back on purpose was hard to fathom. On the other hand, he loved the dreamer, and he knew that look in

her eye when God planted an idea. The bottom line as he liked to put it was “I will follow the redhead anywhere.” And so the spark became a flame.

Such a big step becomes more reasonable when it is taken a little bit at a time. The dreamer had learned that “doing what is doable” is better than biting off more than you can chew. So this is how they began. First this foursome began to imagine together. At times the dreamer and the mentor were prone to charge ahead, but the more hesitant two kept them in check. Together they committed to a path: starting small, taking one step at a time, taking a risk to be real, be known and be authentic, taking time to be formed and transformed together, learning from the neighborhood, serving in do-able ways and staying small but multiplying.

Then they began to pray together. They read books, traded ideas and shared the struggles and joys of life. They walked through personal crisis together and they walked through neighborhoods. They did not rush. They studied demographics, met local leaders and cooked meals. By the fantastical year of 2009 others had become intrigued and began to join in, bringing their hopes and dreams, their favorite recipes and their longing for a new way to live out their life as followers of Jesus. They called their newborn community Urban Abbey.

Together they asked “What if we were just one of many micro-communities planted in neighborhoods, meeting in homes, led by lay leaders, women and men with hearts to serve and to empower others to do the same? What if these communities were places where authentic relationships were nurtured, where people were truly known, where pain could be acknowledged and embraced, where resources and strengths were pooled and Christ showed up in our weakness? What if it was possible to gather by just putting on a pair of sneakers or jumping on a bicycle?” Wow!

As the little Abbey began to form it became clear that these dreams were best fulfilled in ordinary ways, by doing what was doable and by helping each other along the way. They were all ordinary people living out day-to-day life, interacting enough to get on each others’ nerves, helping each other to remember to drink a little less wine, walk a little more, think twice before going on an IKEA shopping spree, befriend neighbors, make handmade gifts together, take Sabbath time, play with children, clean up messes and make efforts to learn from the neighborhood. A savvy young leader of another micro-community told the dreamer “After three years in community I can tell you that becoming part of the neighborhood is not as sexy as it might seem. The best way to get to know your neighbors is to plant some broccoli in your front yard and then hang out to talk as people pass by.” Ordinary do-able efforts actually count!

As the excitement began to build, the dreamer began to fret. “What if we end up inadvertently contributing to gentrification and oppression of the poor by moving into this neighborhood?” That was an unsettling feeling. One day she was invited to a lunch meeting and found herself seated right next to a

delightful older gentleman by the name of Dr. John Perkins. She happened to know that Dr. Perkins was someone who could address her concern wisely.

She told him the story of the little community being birthed in the Northerly neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. And she shared her fears. He took her hand and patted it in a grandfatherly way. He told her something like this: “My dear, someone is going to buy those houses. What I want to know is who that will be and why they are moving into the neighborhood. You go right ahead and buy those houses and you learn the history of the neighborhood. You find the indigenous leaders of the neighborhood. You become friends, you get behind them and support them in leading the way.”

As they went forward they wondered how their little Abbey and other micro-communities for Jesus could best be part of the larger church. They didn't have to look too far for inspiration. The dreamer had a good friend in Seattle, Washington named Pastor Rose. Pastor Rose had begun to imagine what would happen if church buildings were given over to job training, twelve-step groups, childcare and after school tutoring, to regular rhythms of prayer through the week, to parenting and marriage classes and even block parties. Pastor Rose did more than imagine. She led her church forward and made it so. The church became known to the broader community as a light and an agent of loving transformation to the neighborhood and even to the county that church congregation was located in.

The Urban Abbeyites wondered what would happen if many micro-communities joined hands with church leaders who were willing to freely share their buildings and resources with their neighborhoods. What if people saw a church and immediately knew they could go in the doors and find real hope and help? What if congregation members formed into micro-communities themselves? What if instead of funding programs to serve church members they met their own needs by living out real life in small communities that equipped them to give their resources and time make the love of Jesus visible to their entire neighborhood?

LIVING WELL TOWARDS EARTH, GOD AND NEIGHBOR

The possibilities seemed promising, maybe even mind-boggling. The dreamer began to meet with neighborhood leaders and pastors and to consider the gifts and talents of those who had been drawn to the Abbey. The circle and the dreams continued to grow.

One of the Abbeyites was a seminary professor who designed a Christian Earthkeeping concentration and was leading his students in understanding how the gospel intersected with taking care of this earth. The professor helped the little Abbey keep sustainable practices in mind as they formed. How much space did they each need for themselves? When could they share cars and use transit? How did their ordinary choices express their value for justice? What was the relationship between earthkeeping, global systems and issues such as racism,

sexism and poverty, and where did they need to make changes individually and as a community? How did their chosen lifestyle impact their neighborhood and even the world? How could the Abbey become a school of praxis to apprentice young seminarians and other developing leaders for the church?

The Abbeyites were not super-saints. They were just ordinary used-to-be suburban Christians working hard to make one simple change after another. They were willing to open themselves to learn from their neighborhood and from each other. They knew they needed transformation and that being transformed was a process. They knew that making even simple changes against the grain of culture would require plenty of challenging conversation, good supportive companionship and some propping up at times. They were learning to live out a new narrative in a culture whose dominant script is consumerism and individualism. Planting a community garden, sharing responsibility for meals, living in active reconciliation with earth and neighbor, preserving food for the winter and re-evaluating spending practices all became more feasible when tackled in community.

CREATIVE SPIRIT

Urban Abbey was also blessed with a plethora of artists: a potter, a painter, two graphic designers, and a multi-media artist. These community members imagined art as a gift to the neighborhood. They imagined public art installations and Hands on Art in the neighborhood days – art to heal, art to provoke, and art to unite. They also imagined shared workspaces not just for themselves but also for others in the neighborhood. They wondered if such workspaces could foster collaboration and inspire creative energy as artists with various mediums brought their studios together under one roof. Who knew what might come of this!

PLURALISM IN REAL LIFE

The Abbey community was composed of a Lutheran, some ex-Charismatics, some new Charismatics, a Presbyterian, a Vineyard-ite, a member raised in the Roman Catholic church, an Anglican Ana-Baptist hybrid, a seminarian, a seminary professor, a therapist, an addictions counselor, two pastors and an assortment of non-denominational friends. They were inter-generational with members in their 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's along with one teen, two young children and two babies. As you can imagine, this passel of traditions and perspectives led to some occasional conflict and lively conversations. It also brought a wealth of experience and goodness to the community.

Despite the denominational and theological hybridity there was no denying it – in this ethnically diverse neighborhood the Abbeyites were all white, white as could be. The teenaged son of the dreamer attended a multi-cultural high school where as a white boy he was an ethnic minority. He enjoyed challenging

the Abbeyites, reminding them that their stated values and ideals were somewhat disconnected from this reality.

Following the advice of the wise Dr. Perkins, the dreamer began to attend neighborhood gatherings and to learn from long time neighbors. Her dear friend Donna helped by sharing her own experiences and perspective as a black woman in the predominately white Pacific Northwest. One relationship at a time, one story after another is how the best transformation takes place. The little Abbey was open to be taught.

HYBRIDITY AND HOSPITALITY

As is often the case, where artists dwell there is room for difference and room for the other. Community members held friendships with people all over the world, with gay and lesbian friends, with priests and poets, with agnostics and with addicts. All these relationships helped to shape the Abbey and its members. Real friendship made it possible to honor the stories of “the other” by living fully into the story of Jesus.

SPIRIT AND SOUL

The dreamer and the professor both had their eye on a smoky neighborhood bar where they imagined holding Sunday morning Taize prayer services with espresso shots administered upon entry. The dreamer, who spent a good deal of time at her craft of writing and as a pastor-at-large, liked to hang out in the local coffee shop with her prayer book, her laptop and a collection of small stones to dispense as blessings. She welcomed friends, talked with strangers and held space for praying the hours.

She was curious to discover how, over time, integrating prayer, ritual and tangible spiritual practice into the rhythm of day-to-day life right in the middle of bars and coffee houses (in a non-obtrusive manner) might shape the Abbey and the neighborhood. In a culture that is attuned to and longs for a new spirituality the Holy Spirit is already at work. Non-threatening and easily accessible points of connection are invitations to come on in.

A WAY FORWARD

The questions that simmered up between the dreamer and the mentor over coffee have begun to be lived out. Scheduling ahead and driving across town has been replaced by wandering across the street to sip tea on a front porch. Mowing single-family lawns and trimming hedges has been replaced by digging in the dirt with a friend and making pesto from basil grown in a community garden. Conflicts can be resolved by believing the best about the other and meeting face to face in short order. It is easier to imagine how to make more with less as Abbeyites stand together in the transformative process. Neighbors, be they the single mom down the street, the shop owner around the corner, the stripper who lives next door, or the pastor of the historic neighborhood

church, are becoming friends and teachers. Worship and practice wind through the ordinary details of ordinary people making meals, gardening, problem solving and making friends together.

What if the small actions and ordinary gifts of many were joined together in small, nimble communities of faith? What if these micro-communities partnered with or were even birthed by neighborhood churches to incarnate the spirit of Jesus in neighborhoods all over this country and even around the world? These nimble little churches just might embody the very spirit of the triune God who exists in community.

This is the time for the Western church (the church in the third world often does a better job of being rooted in their context, so this once upon a time story is written as an invitation to the West) to truly embody the gospel, to be Jesus in neighborhoods, to reshape and re-imagine economic and social dreams and to cultivate practical, winsome, authentic and redemptive community. The biggest problems present the biggest possibilities. And the biggest possibilities will be best achieved by living into the small ideas. Maybe the best way to start is to plant broccoli in the front yard.

THREE YEARS LATER

*The Lesson of Small, Slow, Flawed, but Still Sustainable
Micro-Communities of Jesus—What Really Happened*

Realities

It's 2013, seven years after Paul, the mentor, and I, the dreamer, had that first conversation over coffee that seeded it all. It is four years since others began to gather around this Urban Abbey dream and discern together. Three and a half years have passed since people began to move into the Kenton neighborhood, and it has been three years since my festschrift chapter was written. The good news today is that Urban Abbey is still alive. And not only are we still alive, we are growing. Maybe not in the ways imagined in part one, but growing we are.

A core value that motivated the formation of Urban Abbey was the commitment to settle in and learn from a neighborhood. As a group, we went through a process of determining criteria for choosing a neighborhood. The funny thing is that prior to any of these conversations, three of the households had, while not knowing each other before the first information meeting, recently purchased homes in two adjacent working class neighborhoods in North Portland: Kenton and Arbor Lodge. Though they were willing to relocate again, in the end, we felt God was in part guiding us by their presence in this area. Paired with that consideration was the fact that, in the middle of our community discernment process, the economy took a plunge and housing values tumbled along with that plunge. That meant that these recent homebuyers were essentially locked into their homes for some time. The combination of economy and a core group “coincidentally” already located in one area, and the fact that features of these neighborhoods that did match enough of our group criteria (walk-ability, local businesses, good access to transit, ethnic and economic diversity) settled the decision. Urban Abbey would be located in Kenton/Arbor Lodge.

By the spring of 2010, about the time that I wrote the hopeful festschrift chapter, two more households purchased a home together. Dan, the professor, and his college student daughter had recently lost their beloved wife and mother to cancer and were looking for community to be part of. The Walkers were newlyweds starting out. The two families decided to pool resources, simplify life, and create a new family of sorts. They purchased a house together and

remodeled the basement, converting it to a terrific starter home for the young couple. Dan and his daughter shared the upper level of the house.

The impact of the downturn in the real estate market on our particular community cannot be understated. The economy and housing market helped determine where we'd land and commit to planting ourselves as a community. It also slowed down the ability of some to make the move into the Kenton/Arbor Lodge neighborhood. Paul and Becky, his wife, put their suburban home on the market and waited and waited. They made repeated price reductions and plenty of spiffy improvements to attract buyers—but no action.

My husband Ken and I found ourselves in a real pickle. To further complicate things, the primary source of our livelihood was real estate. Ken's expertise in real estate sales had underwritten my ministry and provided well for the family for years. If you know a realtor who weathered the 2008-2013 economic chaos in the US, then I don't need to say much about the abrupt changes we faced. In case you don't, here's what happened:

Within a very short time, our income dropped by 80%. Instead of being able to count on a comfortable middle class income, we found ourselves in the poverty bracket. We sold extra possessions, cut back expenses, both picked up work on the side, and fought our way forward. Before it was all over, we faced bankruptcy and foreclosure. We nearly lost our home. If it hadn't been for community, and family and friends who came alongside and helped us over and over, we would have lost everything. For a period of time we even had to rely on food stamps for our groceries. Never having expected to be in such a position, this was humbling for me. Instead of being benefactors and hosts as we were accustomed, we found ourselves needing to depend on the kindness and generosity of others—and, what was for us previously unthinkable—public assistance.

The irony of the situation didn't escape us—we were planning to move into an economically diverse part of the city and we intended to commit ourselves to learn from and identify with the neighbors and their circumstances. In the meantime, we were finding that the financial issues we were facing took us right there emotionally and practically. We weren't in the neighborhood, but we were learning a lot. For instance, did you know that there is no public resource for tampons, toilet paper, and soap? What do people who have no relational or financial safety net do? I have to say, as highly educational as it was, this season was not fun at all.

Maybe if we had planned better, made a point to have ample savings and investments, and hadn't taken that family trip to Africa in 2007, maybe then we would have been in a less precarious situation. But, as it sat, we didn't have a buffer and the lifeless market held on tight for a long, long time. Once we made it past the risk of foreclosure (we can tell some grueling stories about that two and a half year redemption process), it was clear that our house would

not sell for anything close to what we still owed. We felt our best choice was to exercise patience and wait it out for things to turn around.

Ironically, that meant that the entire community was now situated in the neighborhood, except both leader-couples. By September 2011, Paul and Becky managed to get financing without selling their suburban house and were able to find a long-term renter for that home. With the help of realtor Ken, they purchased a home that suited their needs and the needs of the community. The house was perfectly located just around the corner from three other Urban Abbey households in the Kenton neighborhood. One of the leader-couples was in the neighborhood at last.

Proximity Matters

I wish I could tell you that now, as I write in 2013, I am tucked away in at one of the wood slab tables at the fabulous Arbor Lodge Coffee Shop on Rosa Parks Avenue just around the corner from our North Portland community home. Instead, here I sit, at the local library in our still suburban setting, writing and waiting for our time to be freed to move. In the spring of 2011, after a full year of driving an hour and a half each day to bring Elliot to and from school in North Portland, it became clear that our move wasn't happening any time soon. Elliot shifted to the high school in our district where he is just completing his junior year.

Urban Abbey was formed with a primary intention of community members being in geographic proximity to each other and together learning to become part of the fabric of a neighborhood. After it became evident that it would be a while before any Beans were living in Kenton/Arbor Lodge, the community engaged in a discernment process and together determined that we would proceed with Beans continuing on as commuting leaders. The idea of commuting leaders went against the grain of our neo-monastic intention and presented us Beans with (and the community with us at a distance) some significant limitations. Even so, we continued forward in leadership with the Rhoads, ideals, and timelines, tarnished but persevering, just the same.

So, here it is now 2013—and Ken and I are still in the suburbs. The economy is beginning to perk up this spring and housing prices are on the rise; that makes my heart perk up too. We can pay our bills and buy our own food, toilet paper, and tampons. We are paying off personal loans slowly but surely. Maybe it won't be much longer before we are located in Kenton after this strange, long journey of waiting and commuting for neo-monastic community. As I write this, Elliot is poised for his senior year at the suburban high school. We'll stay put one more year for his sake rather than uproot him as he's finishing his goal. But, before we know it, he'll graduate and, perhaps by the time this book is in your hands, we'll be living in Kenton with our fellow Urban Abbeyites. Stay tuned.

In other news, the fact that as of 2013 we were still not in the neighborhood wasn't the only piece of the Urban Abbey story that looked different than my imaginative festschrift tale. Brandon Rhodes of Springwater wasn't kidding when he said that life in community isn't sexy and that you might as well plant broccoli in your yard and wait it out. Real community is shaped over time by the challenges and blessings of ordinary life. We all keep learning that over and over.

All Ages Served

One of the beauties of the group that came together to form Urban Abbey is that it met the criteria for my girlhood ideal of intergenerational communities—where old and young shared life together. That is not frequently the typical demographic for start up neo-monastic communities. Most often, new communities are formed by energetic, idealistic younger people who happen to be in a similar stage of life. Sometimes these communities last and grow and other times they exist to do good for only a season. The birth of babies or career moves often take young community members on down the road. There is nothing wrong with this at all. In fact, I have always felt that community started with the idea of existing for a season or church formed for a set time and purpose could make a lot of sense. Sometimes we can put too much energy into keeping structures going when they have served their good purpose. There is something to be said for being willing to plan for good closure and starting with realistic intentions.

In saying this, don't get me wrong—Ken and I have been married for 31 years and are aiming for another 31. We both have lived in Oregon most of our lives. I led a small community in our home for 24 years. I still cherish and maintain friendships with people I've known since childhood and I make it important to have time with my dear mom at least once a week. I am all about hanging in there for the long haul and sticking with relationship. This notion I have of the possibility of forming community and action for a season isn't about individualist, disposable, un-rooted, flash in the pan thinking. It is simply pragmatic. Just think: it might be a relief to start a community or a church with a shared and known intent to live fully into a mission for three years and then move on. That could mean it is time to disband or it might mean divide and multiply. At the same time, the world needs well-rooted, long-term commitment, stick-to-it-through-thick-and-thin examples too. But, I digress.

Indeed, the real live Urban Abbey story is a “long haul” tale. There's this business of the beautiful intergeneration Abbey community. In theory, it sounds sublime. In reality, it is trickier. My observation of communities that are comprised of younger people in similar life stages is that, due to youth and homogeneity, the group will have high energy, great focus for mission and

hospitality, few distractions, and a lot of flexibility and creativity. They will also likely be dealing with similar issues and concerns (for example, parenting young children at the same time), and can support each other through these while they are in the same boat. Way back in the 80's, when the community that became Third Saturday formed, we were all young married couples who were just starting families. The camaraderie we shared forged friendships that carried us through the challenges of young marriages and families and have friendships that last to this day.

Urban Abbey has discovered that when people in all stages of life come together on a day-to-day basis, it is harder. Older members are often used to doing things in a certain way. Young members can be eager for action or overwhelmed with the responsibilities of life. For the Bryans, the only Abbey family with primary school aged children, there are no other kids to play with. Other households may not be childproof and patience with young inquisitive children can wear thin for some on occasions. That means that the community has been a little lonely for this family with super smart high-energy kids. Scott and Tamara Bryan sometimes feel like they are on their own dealing with the joys and challenges of marriage and parenting at this stage. Those of us who are in another stage can offer perspective and advice and help here and there, but there is nothing like having the solidarity of others in the same phase.

When the community formed, two households were newlywed couples. Within a couple of years, both families had their first babies. Both couples were dual career families and for the first years, they found themselves stretched to their limits with little time for community and barely enough time for each other at points. The Abbey held fairly high expectations for what commitment to community practices and gatherings looked like in that early stage of formation, and, due to this idealism, we lost one of these families. To put it bluntly, they felt pressured and burnt out and we missed the opportunity to make room for their unique needs at that point. In hindsight, we all regretted missing it so badly, but by then they'd moved on. We remain friends but we miss them in the Abbey.

Harder than You Might Think

While we loved to talk about knowing our neighbors, hospitality, reaching out, and learning from the neighborhood, the reality was that almost all of the community members were introverts. Note to self: it may help to have a good core group of extroverts when planting a missional community. An introvert myself, I do feel in good company in Urban Abbey. However, as one of those introverts who loves practicing hospitality, having no home in the neighborhood to lead in being hospitable was a real frustration.

Turns out that Dan, an engaging and well loved professor and lecturer, was shy as can be when it came to meeting neighbors, and had a fondness for watching sports on TV. And remember, he was in the middle of grieving, having lost his wife not long before this whole community endeavor launched. Retreating to the TV after long days of interacting with students was fair enough. Ken the extrovert lived in the suburbs and was in fiscal crisis. He grew weary of planning and meetings and resigned as a leader (although remained an Abbey member).

Shortly after writing the festschrift piece, I, surprised by God, formed the non-profit African Road, and was traveling to Rwanda twice a year (travel funds were made available by a miraculous grant). This international travel was an irony given the tough personal financial situation that we the Beans were experiencing during these years. Rather than rooting in the neighborhood, I was living in the suburbs and spending more and more time building bridges between the US and East Africa. I could formally help lead the community, but could not really become part of the neighborhood. Not living in Kenton also prevented me from offering hospitality and leading by example in the community. I also must confess that when I was able to be in Portland, my Myers-Briggs type INFP tendency to run chronically late was a regular annoyance for more punctual community members. Their annoyance stressed me out while my tardiness and relaxed pace stressed them out. We're all learning that making room for difference and finding ways to understand and respect each other even in simple matters like these is real work.

Becky suffered a traumatic back injury when moving into her new house. This changed life for her. She'd dreamed of opening a wine shop or a bookstore and of gardening to her heart's content. Instead, she found herself house-bound and in debilitating chronic pain. At the same time, her aging parents required relocation from the generations old family farm in the valley and the dispersal of decades of possessions, and the responsibility to manage this fell to her. Paul, a stellar leader and guide for many, many leaders and churches around the world, found, to his surprise, that he was much more comfortable with leading meetings, setting agendas, coaching other Christians, and having firm plans than just hanging out in the neighborhood to get to know ordinary folks. He struggled with personal disappointment at this internal hurdle. Five community members went through job changes or career changes. Our sage artist Don, a living miracle with Type I diabetes and no pancreas (having won a battle with pancreatic cancer some years ago) faced two amputations, foot infections, and some scary low blood sugar hospitalizations. His wife Karen, a family therapist who traveled around the world to work with mission teams in their immediate context, needed backup help at home so she could continue her work and support their household. She is an outgoing person and a great connector in the neighborhood, but she was gone a lot and when she returned from these intense work trips she was often ready to retreat and to be with Don.

Drama and Politics

More than one community member faced a season of clinical depression and began therapy. Politics and philosophical differences popped up as points of tension here and there. Interestingly enough, my big-hearted husband is the more conservative member of the community. He has found himself feeling alone and on the outs when it comes to political and philosophical discussions in the Abbey. He and I often cancel each other's votes in political elections. We have navigated our differences by agreeing to disagree and by respecting what we know of each other's character instead of reaching agreement in belief systems. Others don't know him as well as I do and the difference of opinion has, at times, been very uncomfortable, especially for him. We are all still finding our way forward on this point.

In addition to our financial duress, we Beans were in a tough season with our adult daughters and often felt overwhelmed with grief and worry. As the trials for our Bean family wore on, the community continued to walk with us, pray for us, and help in practical ways. For some, this grew to be a heavy load. It was not what any of us had expected we were signing up for. The romantic edge had worn off.

This quote from Henri Nouwen, who learned about himself and about living in community during his years in L'Arche Community, gives me reassurance that we are not crazy to keep going forward one millimeter at a time with each other: "You have to be willing to live your loneliness, your incompleteness, your lack of total incarnation fearlessly, and trust that God will give you the people to keep showing you the truth of who you are."² Despite Henri's words you might be ready to throw up your hands and wonder what on earth this dysfunctional group of people was thinking even trying to start and stay in community. Stay with me here.

There is something to sticking with it when the going is rough or when it might seem that nothing worthwhile is taking place. Kathy Silveria-Escobar posted this bit of wisdom on Facebook: "A core piece of rebuilding is beginning to resurrect parts of us that have been lost, squelched, stifled, ignored, unvalued over the years. We can't think our way into a new life, but we can live our way into a new life. Part of rebuilding is really somehow about our souls being 'born again.'"³

I believe that we of Urban Abbey are gradually living our way into a new life and inch by inch as a community, we are being born. Since we are aiming for the long haul, maybe it makes good sense to go slowly. Abbey members have come to know each other well over the years. We've taken time to each share our personal stories and to hear the stories of others in the Abbey. We've seen

2 Nouwen, Henri J. M.. *The inner voice of love: a journey through anguish to freedom*. New York: Doubleday, 1996, page 54.

3 Kathy Escobar

each person at their best and at their worst (or close to it). We've had the joy of coming to know each other's children and extended families. We've learned a lot about letting go and trusting and being patient.

We've also been getting better and better at saying we are sorry and seeking healing and understanding. One of the core commitments that Paul and I brought to the forming community was the value of reconciliation; what we called, "choosing to believe the best about each other." Paul articulated it like this: "When we are struggling to believe the best about each other, we'll ask for each other's help, trusting the work of God in the other person." That commitment has come in handy more than once, I assure you. In fact, as the years have gone by, Paul and I have had the occasion to put it to the test in our own relationship. We can still wear on each other's nerves and have to start over again, but we know we can. This way of living and being is no small thing—the world would be a more peaceful place if more people chose this way forward.

Hospitality Attempts

As for connecting with the neighborhood, although she's an introvert too, Tamar, the mom of those lively and loved younger kids Will and Maya, stepped up and has become an unofficial neighborhood liaison. With her children in the school at the end of the block, with her artist and ceramics studio in the shed behind her house, and with a passion to make a difference, she's really rooted in the neighborhood. Leading the way with gardening days at the school, keeping everyone up-to-date with school district boundary decisions, helping with neighborhood art fairs, and introducing neighbors, she's nudged the community members forward into the neighborhood. She's lost her patience more than once with the poky Abbey members but she keeps sticking it out. I am glad. Last summer her willing husband Scott pulled the grill out to the sidewalk and sparked a come-one-come-all street BBQ every other week. He's launched his own Portland style micro-brewing adventure that invites people in to enjoy the process—and the product—and now he's venturing into the realm of artisan baking. That will sure be inviting, too.

Dan got up the nerve to host a neighborhood BBQ that ended up being a real hit. Neighbors who hadn't met before congregated in his driveway and on his porch, sharing potluck dishes, tending the grill, and swapping stories. He had fun, too. Don, even when wheelchair bound, tends a bountiful garden in his front yard and is readily available for a deep conversation or a quick hello. Don also spends hours at his work as a fine artist, creating beautiful, delicate, Asian inspired masterpieces that capture story and feeling. He brings unique and valued perspective as an artist and a philosopher and as a man keenly aware of his mortality to the community. Karen and Don welcome Dan over at 10:00 p.m. each weeknight to close the day, sharing examen together. Becky, with

the largest dining table, pushes through the pain to make her home available for community gatherings over and over. Her roomy basement with baskets of fun toys is a favorite destination for kids.

Tamara and Dan have been known to spontaneously make pints and pints of pickles and jam and to go on berry picking sprees with Will, Maya, and Dan's granddaughter Kenley in tow. Last year, Don had a bumper crop of cucumbers that blessed the whole neighborhood. Each week, a different duo prepares Sunday dinner for the community and for any guests who may be joining in. To cover meal expenses, childcare, retreat expenses, and miscellaneous community needs, Urban Abbey set up an account at a local Credit Union. Every month, each household contributes what they can to the community fund to be sure that we can cover these costs from a common pot when the need arises.

Kids Are Awesome

The Abbey is a warm touch point and loving community for our grandson Gabe (seven years old at the time of this writing) who spends part of each month with us. Paul and Becky have two young grandchildren who fold into gatherings now and then too. Two and half years ago, baby Molly Walker arrived on the scene in community life. We've all enjoyed watching her grow and making space for her. Don and Karen live a stone's throw from the Walker's basement door. This comes in handy for Molly's mom, Marbry, a graphic designer with a studio in her home. Karen and Molly are known to take neighborhood walks together, giving Marbry a bit of breathing space or time to work on a design deadline. Being close neighbors has worked in Don and Karen's favor, too. If Don is having a medical emergency or is in need of transportation, he can send Marbry and Rich a quick text, and they are next door in a flash.

Maya, Will, Molly, and Gabe have known the Abbeyites most of their lives now and we love them all as though we are their aunts and uncles. The children are comfortable joining in the weekly community rituals of Eucharist and examen and weaving in and out of our meeting times. Kids can keep us flexible and playful and prompt us to remember simple joys. Keeping kids in mind helps us to be more creative with our spiritual practices—perhaps reading liturgy outdoors while we all blow bubbles into the sky with each prayer and scripture. Playground excursions with children are perfect for meeting neighbors. Kids can be natural connectors and icebreakers.

Children love traditions and rituals. When we consider how we might pass our faith stories on to kids in winsome ways that give them the opportunity to make those stories their own, the whole community is shaped. This year, we gathered on Maundy Thursday at Tamara and Scott's home. Maya directed her own version of an Easter passion play with Will, Gabe, and their friend Anya, as cast and crew bringing the story to life with seriousness, energy, a

touch of humor, and a recognition that they were part of something special. While kids might poke a penny in someone else's DVD player and bring it to a grinding halt, have a tantrum in the middle of prayer, pee on a couch that isn't theirs, or throw up at the community retreat, they are part of us and we are part of them. When we are willing, we can learn from the children in our communities. Kids can help lead the way.

Rooted and Helpful

Molly's dad Rich Walker is a new small business owner in the neighborhood. A stellar bike mechanic (Portland is a big bicycling town), Rich and his friend Starmichael opened Kenton Cycle Repair a year ago, only a handful of blocks from home. The shop is fast becoming a community hub with its self-serve bike repair stand, free tools, consult set up on the sidewalk for DIY folks, and excellent customer service right inside the door. Rich joined the neighborhood business association and knows the names of most people he passes on the street now.

Recently, Paul came to me and shared that he is choosing to move out of his comfort zone of leadership in Urban Abbey. Paul's sense is that stepping down from a leadership role will help him begin to connect in more meaningful ways in the neighborhood. Along with making this change, Paul, a bit of a biking fanatic, has begun to spend time volunteering in the Kenton Cycle Repair shop. There, Rich can introduce Paul to neighbors and teach him new skills on a number of levels, and Paul can find a new place where he can belong. Rich is doing what he loves. He's sharing that with the neighborhood. He's making friends as he does what comes naturally and, he's making way for others to do the same. Paul, more familiar with being in charge and knowing what to do, is putting himself in the position of a learner. He is doing it for the sake of relationship and growth. Now that is beautiful.

Sizing It Up

There is no Taize service in the smoky bar yet, no major arts blitz of the neighborhood, no great plans for planting any new communities at this time, no partnerships with local congregations, and we are probably still a ways away from apprenticing anyone else to do much of anything. As a community, we have a ways to go in the hospitality and welcome arena, but the good news is that there is time to learn.

Recently, we took time for a "State of the Union" conversation as a community. At first, it seemed that we had little to show for all the years invested, all the meetings planned and attended, all the prayers prayed, all the plans made,

all the dreams shared, and all the emotion spent. We lamented mistakes and recognized people we'd hurt in the process of learning.

Then, we took a look at values and practices we'd identified together in 2011, and we began to reflect back on what we've created and shared together. What we discovered was more heartening than expected. We were able to see that, in the middle of our own deficiencies and brokenness, Jesus is and has been present. We saw measurable evidence that what we'd hoped and planned for might one day be realized—or, maybe could even be something more than we'd hoped and planned for.

We looked at the community practices we'd agreed on: living in the neighborhood (all there except the Beans), gathering each week for Sunday shared meal and worship, taking an annual retreat together, sharing Wednesday “refrigerator” meals (bring what you have on hand), hosting neighborhood BBQ's, and meeting in periodic small groups. We realized we'd done them all.

Pairing this reflection with stories of how God had used both difficult and encouraging events to help us grow in the past couple of years gave us more perspective. We had begun to let go of expectations that were too idealistic, we were beginning to make new connections in the neighborhood, and we were learning to become more patient with each other and to find creative ways to help and support each other. There were signs of real growth in each of our lives and in the life of a community forming together. When we turned to look at our stated community values, we could start to see that we were being shaped as we were attempting, flawed as those attempts might be, to live these out.

Urban Abbey Values

1. Communal formation: We will seek as a community to be formed into the Way of Jesus for the sake of the world, through such practices as prayer, examen, Eucharist, and service.
Real life action: Our Sunday gathering is shaped around prayer, Eucharist and examen, and sharing. We meet weekly.
2. Relational integrity: We will preserve unity and accept each other's uniqueness by modeling transparency and healthy boundaries, believing the best of each other, and attending to what is broken directly and with grace.
Real life action: We keep trying and haven't given up yet.
3. Grateful celebration: We will gather together in thanksgiving and joy by regularly worshiping and sharing God's gifts of food and drink.
Real life action: We are good at cooking and eating together. Gathering around the table for fellowship is something that we do well. We roast coffee together too.

4. Sustainable living: We will take delight in and steward the earth by gardening, using alternative transportation, and resisting consumerism.

Real life action: Kenton and Arbor Lodge are on the MAX train line.

Community members make an effort to use mass transit. One household uses only bikes for transportation and two households have only one car. Community members share cars with each other freely. The Abbey has four gardens between the houses and shares and preserves produce. We encourage each other to recycle and divest of possessions every now and again.

5. Neighborhood involvement: We will learn from and love the Kenton and Arbor Lodge neighborhoods by building genuine relationships and meeting concrete needs.

Real life action: We are working on it. Tamara and Rich are leading the way.

6. Intentional inclusivity: We will struggle against racism, sexism, and other forms of global injustice through such pursuits as hospitality, egalitarian leadership, and social activism.

Real life action: We are working on it!

Read these values through the cracked lens of the honest stories of real life in Urban Abbey that I've shared. We don't have this down pat, and, in fact, if you read these values and then look at us, you might even wonder if we are talking about the same community. We still have far to go but, if baby steps can count, then it is possible to see that something real is happening. And, I say, if planting broccoli can count, then baby steps count. We'll keep watering that "broccoli" and looking out for "bugs." We'll talk with neighbors who pass by and we'll keep learning from each other and from the neighborhood.

As they say in East Africa, good things happen, "pole, pole" (Swahili pronounced pole-ay, translated: slowly by slowly). Catch me in three more years for the next update of this messy God-sized story.

GOD IS MOVING. And just might be somewhere you haven't looked . . . **YET.**

What happens when the church no longer nurtures, feeds, or challenges you?
What do you do when the thought of leaving breaks your heart—but staying hurts more?

Kelly Bean has been there. For anyone seeking genuine Christian community, she offers both heartfelt encouragement and practical suggestions for finding or creating a community of faith that honors God and offers rest, love, and communion with other believers. With true stories of those who have faced these questions and found a way forward, this book shows you how to be faithful in a place where you will truly flourish.

“Kelly’s book is a significant gift, gathering into one place the real-world brilliance and experience of fellow travelers who are asking the question of church.”
—**WM PAUL YOUNG**, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Shack*

“Kelly Bean is a wise, whimsical, and revolutionary iconoclast. This book will call some to leave what is really not church, and it will call others to reengage the meaning of being a redemptive church.”—**DAN B. ALLENDER**, PhD, professor of counseling psychology and founding president of The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

“For those who struggle with church as they know it, this book can awaken imagination for all that Christian community can be. Kelly Bean writes with a wise, gentle, honest, and persuasive voice that we should pay attention to.”—**MARK SCANDRETTE**, author of *Free*, *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, and *Soul Graffiti*

“Despite her provocative title, Kelly Bean loves the church. This book will help those struggling to remain in institutional churches, and those who’ve left, to understand the challenge we all face today and to set some markers for the road ahead.”
—**MICHAEL FROST**, author of *Exiles* and *The Road to Missional*

“Bean speaks with both the integrity and authenticity of one who has suffered in the course of arriving at her summations and conclusions. I could wish that every Christian today would read this one.”—**PHYLLIS TICKLE**, author of *The Age of the Spirit* and *The Great Emergence*

**KELLY
BEAN**

served as pastor/cultivator of Third Saturday Organic community, which gathered in her living room for twenty-four years. She is coplanter of Urban Abbey, an egalitarian intergenerational intentional community in north Portland, Oregon.

Cover Design: Libby VanderPloeg

 **BakerBooks**
a division of Baker Publishing Group